

4 JESUS

Keep the **Christ** in **Christianity**



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The Testimony of Jesus

An explosion!

There's no other way to describe it. From a dusty, half-forgotten corner of the Roman world, a message detonated. By the word of their mouth, the blood of the Lamb, and their refusal to love their own lives, simple men and women propagated this message. Their testimony lit fires throughout the empire, despite its determined efforts to douse the flames. The word proved more powerful than the sword, and the world has never been the same.

What was this message?

History Gets Strange

Wherever this testimony has ignited a fire, unexplainable things have happened.

One spring morning in Palestine, crowds of religious pilgrims clogging Jerusalem begin to gather around a small cluster of excited, almost giddy men and women. A spokesman for the little group—an uneducated man with a country accent—steps forward and tries to explain: "Really, folks, we only *look* drunk..."

Within hours, three thousand of the pilgrims have given up *everything* to join this little group of religious outcasts who claim to be following an executed criminal.

Just what had that spokesman said to the crowd?

Years later, a different young man from this renegade group accepts the challenge to debate some local defenders of the status quo. Unable to refute his wisdom, his opponents drag him before the national governing body to attack his views. He delivers a calm lecture on the nation's history—hardly the stuff that riots are made of—but his concluding paragraph is a bombshell. The conservative, dignified rulers of Israel begin grinding their teeth. The young man seals his own doom with one sentence more. Still not satisfied after seeing stones crush the life from the speaker, one member of the audience pledges his life to stamping out this message by whatever means necessary.

What in the world made those people so upset?

Still later, this dedicated antagonist of the new sect becomes one of its most powerful propagators! Now it is *his* turn to suffer. He begins traveling throughout the empire, spreading the message he once tried to drown in blood. He and a friend arrive in one town and perform an undeniable miracle. The citizens want to sacrifice to him as a god. Yet within days, they are dragging him out of the city and trying to crush *his* life with stones. This reaction is hardly an exception. The troublesome young man starts riots nearly everywhere he goes!

What message could provoke such passions?

They called it the Good News, the gospel. It's a word we're all familiar with. But have we really stopped to consider the gospel our first century friends proclaimed?

The Message

Let's return to that seemingly simple man addressing the crowd of pilgrims, Peter on the day of Pentecost. What was his message?

First, Peter quotes a passage from Joel to explain that his friends' strange behavior is due to an outpouring of God's Spirit. Then he begins his proclamation: "*Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purposes and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him.*" (2:22-24)

Peter quotes another passage, from the Psalms this time, supporting the resurrection. He continues: "*God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, He has received the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear....Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah!*" (2:32-33,36)

Peter's message was a proclamation of Jesus! It was a testimony delivered with simplicity, sincerity, and boldness: "You know you killed a good man when you crucified Jesus. What you *don't* know is that He's alive! What's more, He's exalted to the right hand of the very Creator of the Universe, and He's reigning over creation as Anointed One even as we speak! By the way, we are *witnesses*—we know for a fact these things are so."

What cut thousands of hearers to the heart was a proclamation of *Jesus* from the lips of one whose life had been radically changed by His resurrection. A living, exalted Jesus was the very heart of the message!

And what of that man who infuriated his debaters—Stephen before the Sanhedrin?

After a summary of Israel's persistently rebellious dealings with God, Stephen concluded: *You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him!*" (Acts 7:51-52)

The leaders were furious, to the point of gnashing their teeth. Yet at this point, even after holding them directly responsible for the crucifixion, Stephen might still have escaped with his life. But he poured fuel on the fire with this explosive statement: "*Look! I see heaven open, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!*" (verse 56). The leaders went ballistic at that phrase! Within minutes, Stephen's body was lying broken in the street, and his spirit was resting unharmed in Jesus' arms.

Again, what was the heart of the message? What was its power? A man, "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5) and "full of God's grace and power" (6:8), proclaimed that the crucified Jesus was now alive and exalted to God's right hand.

And what of that persecutor turned apostle, Saul of Tarsus? What was his message? How did he raise such wonderful churches on the one hand and such an awful ruckus on the other? The events in Lystra, where Paul was trying to convince the citizens he wasn't a god one minute, then dragging himself back into the city after being stoned and left for dead the next, were a direct result of his testimony in Antioch and Iconium. Jews from those towns followed Paul to Lystra and "won the crowd over."

In Antioch, Paul had stood in the synagogue and proclaimed: "*The people of Jerusalem did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning Him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have Him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in the tomb. But God raised Him from the dead, and for many days He was seen by those who had traveled with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now His witnesses to our people....Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.*" (Acts 13:27-31,38)

Some of the people of Antioch "were glad and honored the word of the Lord;" others "talked abusively" and "stirred up persecution." So Paul moved on to Iconium. His message there? "*Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord.*" Throughout the book of Acts, the apostolic testimony could be summed up in those words: speaking boldly for Jesus. And the response in Iconium sums up the response everywhere: "*The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles.*" (13:4) And so Paul soon found out how Stephen had felt when the stones began to hit!

Conspicuously Absent

Read the book of Acts with this question in mind: What was the message? You will find a variety of approaches rather than a canned, textbook method. But you will find this constant: *a bold proclamation that Jesus is alive*. Sometimes the speakers fill in a few details from His life. Often they mention His ascension.

They describe Him as the appointed judge of all men, the source of salvation, and the giver of the Spirit. Of course Paul and the other apostolic witnesses always “glory in the cross.” Never do they offer a bloodless gospel! No, they proclaim “Christ and Him crucified.” Yet their testimony is likewise always of a *living* Jesus, the Lord of this and every moment, a force who cannot be ignored!

There are a few approaches you *won't* find the apostles using, however:

“Follow these five steps or those four spiritual laws and you’ll go to heaven when you die.” The focus was on beholding the Lamb of God—not the plan of salvation—who takes away the sins of the world. The *person* of Jesus was the issue.

“God has a wonderful plan for your life. If you’ll only accept Jesus as your personal Savior, look at all the benefits you’ll receive.” The apostolic gospel was not man-centered at all. It was thoroughly Christ-centered. We often think to persuade people to “accept Christ” by dangling the benefits of Christianity in front of their noses, in hopes that they will later come to a place of greater commitment as their faith grows. The apostles’ approach was refreshingly different. Jesus Himself was the only bait on their hook. It was those who swallowed Him whole—often in the face of persecution—who received those wonderful teachings about the good things we have in Christ.

“Poor Jesus is standing outside the door of your heart, just begging to come in. Look at Him, all battered and torn, out there all alone. How can you stand to keep the door closed?” No way! Our first century brothers *never* presented a pitiful picture of Jesus to play on our guilt. They proclaimed a victorious Christ and demanded unconditional surrender to Him. Again, there was a greater emphasis on what *Jesus* gets out of the gospel than on what we get out of it!

Two Apostles Describe Their Gospels

And so the first century gospel was not a *formula* to be accepted, but a *Person* to be trusted, loved, and obeyed.

Paul wrote Timothy: “Remember Christ Jesus, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal.” (2 Tim 2:8-9) That’s how Paul summed up his message. “Jesus is alive (‘raised from the dead’) and He’s reigning as King (‘descended from David’). What will you do with Him?”

To the Romans Paul spoke of his “*priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.*” He added: “*So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ...where Christ was not known.*” (15:16,19-20) And he concludes his letter with this blessing: “*Now to Him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey Him.*” (16:25-26) This was the gospel to Paul: By the command of the Eternal One, the *proclamation of Jesus* to people who didn’t really know Him, so that they might believe and obey and in so doing become a living sacrifice acceptable to Him.

The message was Jesus. The response was a believing submission to Him.

The apostle John summed it up even more simply. “*We accept man’s testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which He has given about His Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made Him out to be a liar, because He has not believed the testimony God has given about His Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*” (1 John 5:9-12) The apostolic testimony must enter our hearts and take up residence there. It must penetrate beyond our intellects! Deep within us, we must see *Jesus Himself* as eternal life.

The living, reigning Jesus is the gospel. That is why it will never do for us simply to analyze the New

Testament proclamation about Him so that we can recite it to those around us.

We ourselves must come to see Jesus!

Face or Vase?

Maybe you remember the “face-vase” picture from Psych 101. It’s the classic illustration of the problem of the “figure” and the “ground.” When our brains confront an outline drawing, they have to choose what areas to interpret as the object in view and what areas to interpret as background. What do you see when you look at the figure below? Focus on the area *within* the lines and you will see a vase. Focus *outside* the lines and you will instead see two faces gazing at each other. Two people can look at the same simple lines at the same time and perceive two very different pictures.



Whether you see a face or a vase is inconsequential. But our brain’s dilemma in interpreting pictures can illustrate a crucial decision we must all make. In fact, it is the most important question you will ever answer:

What do you *personally* see when you look at Jesus?

The Bedrock of Revelation

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied: "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" He asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by My Father in heaven."

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

It was a question with many answers. To the crowds, Jesus was a prophet, a miracle worker, a man who could supply bread. To the politically minded, He was the potential liberator, the hero who would throw off Roman domination by force. To the religious leaders, He was a dangerous fanatic who threatened their position of power and influence.

Yet Jesus has never been satisfied with the results of public opinion polls. He has a pressing question in mind:

“But what about *you*? Who do *you* say I am?”

Simon came up with an astonishing answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” How did he figure that out? He didn’t memorize it in Sabbath school or read it in the rabbinical writings. As Jesus makes clear, Simon didn’t receive that idea from another human being at all. Instead, something quite miraculous had happened: the Creator of the universe Himself had given a humble Galilean fisherman an insight straight from His Divine Heart. In Jesus’ phrase, the Father had *revealed* it.

And such a heavenly revelation of Jesus, as the Lord Himself stressed, is the foundation upon which the entire church is built. *"And I tell you that you are Peter [a stone], and on this rock [bedrock] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

The prerequisite for all spiritual effectiveness against Satan’s realm and all spiritual authority on earth (“binding” and “loosing”) is a revelation of Christ that only Heaven itself can give.

No Longer From a Worldly Point of View

That revelation was the secret behind the effectiveness and authority of the early church. The revelation

of Jesus was both the logic and the motivation behind their persistent proclamation of Him. They weren't following a church growth manual. They didn't get together and work out a strategy for world evangelism. They didn't try to implement "methods" as such at all. It was simply that the resurrected Messiah, the very alive Son of the very alive God, was so *real* to them that they "couldn't help speaking about what they had seen and heard."

Others looked at a bearded, sandaled carpenter from the backwoods of Palestine and saw a prophet or a grass-roots politician or a free lunch or a threat to security. But these early believers looked at Jesus with their spiritual eyes—and *saw*. And Peter wasn't the only one! They all could say with Paul: "And so from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." (2 Cor 5:16)

How did Paul come to regard Jesus? Just listen: "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the Head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him.*" (Col. 1:15-19)

Where did Paul get those ideas, anyway? He didn't hear them from Gamaliel! He didn't figure them out somehow by logically analyzing this "no beauty or majesty" young Nazarene who ate and drank and slept and sweated and died like the rest of us. No, Paul genuinely *got to know* the resurrected Jesus and described to us what he saw.

Or take John for example. He could write: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men....The Word became flesh and dwelt for a while among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* (John 1:1-5,14) Most observers saw what John saw—but didn't see it. As John relates it: *He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.*" (John 1:10-11) The Beloved Disciple was able to take in the same sensory data everyone else did, but see something radically different. He saw Jesus!

Then there is the anonymous writer of Hebrews. Here was a man thoroughly familiar with Jewish thought and tradition and values. Yet he was able to see far beyond the Messianic speculations of his peers: *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So He became as much superior to the angels as the name He has inherited is superior to theirs.*" (1:1-4)

"Flesh and blood" could *not* have revealed these truths to this man. He must have experienced the *real* Jesus, by the mercies of God!

Have we?

What Do You See?

Again Jesus is asking—and this time, He's asking *us*—"But what about *you*? Who do *you* say I am?"

It's time for us to be honest. When we look at the simple word picture of Jesus painted for us in the gospels, what do each of us personally see? Do we look at the lines and see only a "vase" (an inanimate, though perhaps beautiful, thing), or have we looked beyond the lines and seen the "faces" (a relationship)? No one is going to tell you, "You have a revelation of Christ" or "You don't have one." But do be honest with yourself.

By being honest we have nothing to lose—and potentially everything to gain.

Who is Jesus to you?

Is He a figure from history for you to think about, or is He a living presence and reality in your daily existence?

Is He a compilation of stories and doctrines, or is He a Person?

Is He locked up between AD 30 and 33 in your awareness, or is He free to control your present moment?

Is He only someone to remember as you take the Lord's Supper, or is He also someone whose body you discern and whose fellowship you enjoy as He eats and drinks with you?

Are His words something you chew on, or something you swallow and feed on?

Is He located in a distant heaven off beyond Alpha Centauri, or is He someone in whom you "live and move and have your being"?

When you are tempted, do you just try harder, or can you approach His throne of grace with confidence in your time of need? And if you sin, have you broken His rules—or His heart?

You have the teachings of Christ; do you also have the mind of Christ?

Is He the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, or is He a theological abstraction?

Let's try to give an honest answer to these questions, even if it isn't the *right* answer. Pretending won't solve any of our problems, will it? It's the poor in spirit, the hungry and thirsty ones, who receive the kingdom and get fed.

All of us who read these words will be at different stages of our journey. Hopefully most of us have had an initial seeing of Jesus. We have a genuine awareness of Him as Savior and Lord. If that really isn't the case for you, don't despair! *Seek Him*. He created you and set you in the time and place you now occupy so that just maybe you would reach out and find Him. He's not really that far away! (Acts 17:26-28) You don't have to prove or earn anything. You need only reach out for the real Jesus. He's already reaching out for you!

For those of us who have seen Jesus as Savior: Let's not be satisfied to stay on whatever plateau we may find ourselves on. Let's press on deeper into the knowledge of Him! Have the heart of Paul: "*I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*" (Phil 3:10-14)

Everything Else is Rubbish!

What is your response to what you've read so far? Are you hungry for more of Jesus? If we are to live in an ongoing, increasing inner revelation of Him, there is an essential attitude we must adopt. Paul portrays this mindset right before the passage we've just quoted: "*But whatever is to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.*" (Phil 3:7-8)

It is a law of the Kingdom. We will find Christ to the degree we are willing to consider *everything else rubbish*.

As Jesus put it, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel will find it." (Mt 10:39) It sounds paradoxical, but it is true. The only way to receive true life from Jesus is to give our lives fully to Him. Other passions, other goals, other values will block our receiving a revelation of Christ. We cannot hope to have Jesus fill our cup unless we hand Him an empty one and ask.

Let's consider a group of very normal Christians—as *God* defines normal, that is! The church in Thessalonica had few of our advantages. They were birthed in persecution and suffering. Paul had only been able to stay with them a matter of weeks—a few months at most—and had been unable to return. The Thessalonians had no New Testament, and illiteracy and the lack of modern printing severely restricted their access to the Old. As a result, they were confused about some basic doctrines, especially about the Second Coming. In all likelihood Paul had been unable to appoint elders there, so there was only an “unofficial” leadership, composed of young Christians willing to take responsibility, to guide the church through the difficult challenges facing them.

Yet who could deny that the Thessalonian church was living with spiritual authority and effectiveness in a true revelation of Jesus? Consider Paul's testimony about this church, taken from his first letter to them.

The gospel had come to them “not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). Jesus had opened their eyes to see beyond the words of the gospel to discern in it the Word of an active, living, working God (2:15). The faith, love, and hope in Jesus this Word produced in them were already bearing fruit (1:3). They were taking on the suffering, redemptive lifestyle of Jesus; His life was replacing their own (1:6), and His message was ringing out through them (1:8). Despite their lack of equipping (which Paul still hoped to supply—3:10), God Himself had been able to teach them by revelation (4:9). Paul had complete confidence in their ability to discern spiritual wisdom from the world's counterfeit (5:19-20). He could pray that even in his own absence that Jesus would make them strong, holy, and ready for His appearing—and Paul expected that Jesus would do it! (3:12-13; 5:23-24) His confidence was justified; by the time he wrote his second letter, the Thessalonian's faith and love were still growing (2 Thess 1:3).

In short, the Thessalonians had become a model church (1 Thess 1:7).

How had this group of “underprivileged” believers reached such a point of maturity and spiritual stature, and in such a short time? The answer is wrapped up in their initial reception of the gospel: “...You turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” (1:9-10)

The Thessalonians had *turned to God from idols*. Idolatry is any expenditure of our passions on some created thing in hopes that we will receive worth or significance or meaning in return. This church had received Christ by emptying their cup of all such idolatry.

They had adopted a single life agenda, *to serve the living and true God*. When they heard Paul's gospel, they became convinced, as was Paul, that “One died for all, and therefore all died; and He died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died for them and was raised again.” To the Thessalonians, Christianity wasn't “fire insurance” to keep them out of hell; it wasn't a self-centered focus on the blessings they would receive. They *saw* in the gospel a God of Life and Reality, and from then on their own personal pursuit of life and reality became knowing and serving Him.

And they were *waiting for His Son from Heaven—Jesus*. They became the good and faithful servants, whose Master would find them prepared when He returned. They rejected the allure of the temporary and fixed their eyes on the eternal.

Friend, if you and I are to receive an effectual revelation of Christ in our lives and to have this revelation in increasing measure, there is no other way. We must turn to Jesus poor in spirit, hungry and thirsting for His righteousness. We must deal ruthlessly with any area of life that is not submitted to His Lordship, for He cannot fill something we are reserving for ourselves. As we turn to Him, we must turn from any idolatry, whether of career or family or possessions or hobbies. He wants to be our All in All!

He receives all who will receive Him in this way.

“If you seek Me you will find Me, if you seek Me with all of your heart.”

When Paul and Timothy Were Thinking About These Matters, They Had to Stop

and Talk to God...

"Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:9-14)

Paul and Timothy saw clearly that outward fruitfulness, growth, endurance, patience, and worship require that God first fill us with a "knowledge of His will through spiritual wisdom and understanding." That awareness drove them to their knees. Before we move on to consider how our personal revelation of Jesus impacts on our lives together as the church, maybe we should stop and talk to Him, too?

The Boundaries or the Center?

"And I tell you that you are Peter, a little rock; and on this huge mass of bedrock—this heaven birthed revelation of who I am—I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

A building is defined by its foundation. The depth and strength and extent of a foundation determine whether the structure erected on it will hug the ground or scrape the sky. An engineer would ignore this principle only at his own risk—and at the peril of both the workmen and the eventual occupants of that building.

Jesus has defined for us the foundation of the church. He *is* that foundation. And who we perceive Him to be determines who we can become. That fact really should determine how we think and how we function as local assemblies of believers.

Two Ways to Define the Local Church

In practice, though, how do local gatherings of saints seek to establish their identities? There are two basic approaches. We can try to establish our *boundaries*, or we can try to define our *center*.

Imagine a town full of people. Some claim to be believers; some don't. We have a hard time telling who is a true believer and who isn't; we can't readily discern which of the unbelievers are "white unto harvest" and which are "sons of destruction." Yet we recognize that Jesus wants a church—whatever that means to us—rather than a hodgepodge of isolated individuals. So what do we do?

Well, we could proceed by a group of us getting together and deciding on some boundaries: "OK. Here are the criteria for who's part of the church. Here are our lines of fellowship. Everyone on this side of the line is in. Everyone on that side is out. You guys inside the lines: you are the church. So act like one! And while you're at it, see if you can start educating those outsiders about the lines so they'll come inside, too, and be a part of us."

Sounds logical—but let's take a closer look. How have local assemblies taking the "boundary" approach chosen their lines of fellowship?

Some have adopted *human reason and intellect* as the line of fellowship. These assemblies emphasize correct doctrine, by which they mean an arbitrary collection of approved concepts and teachings. The scriptures are distilled down in the acid of human rational analysis, and the supposed essence of Christianity remains. The church is composed of those who believe *this* teaching about the End Times, and *that* doctrine about church government, and *this other* concept about conversion...and on and on and on. Accept the creed (whether written or not) and you are in; disagree significantly, and you are out. (In fact, disagree with enough points and your salvation could be seriously in jeopardy!)

Others have chosen *religious experiences* that emphasize human emotional response to God as their

identifying characteristic. The “insiders” are those who profess to have had a certain ecstatic experience or to have received certain spiritual gifts. A lack of such outward religious manifestations at the very least calls into question a person’s spirituality.

Still other groups find their identity in *the deeds they will do for God*. Willpower sets the boundary and the group goal becomes the consuming passion. Maybe the group wants to evangelize the world in one generation, or maybe it wants to establish social justice or influence the political climate. Regardless, the goal becomes the focus. If you can embrace and make a positive contribution towards that goal, you are welcome. If not...

These descriptions are not intended to be hyper-critical or oversimplified. Usually the boundaries we choose are a blend of these emphases. And rarely does any assembly set out consciously to establish an identity in this way. But this approach, conscious or not, has some serious consequences.

Ultimately Divisive

The problem is not that doctrines, experiences, or good works are inherently wrong; the trouble comes when we try to define our corporate identity with them. One of the most serious problems with a “boundary” approach is that it tends to include some who aren’t really “in” with Jesus while excluding others who are His delight!

Suppose a man or woman is “blessed” with an extraordinarily strong will. They love to get things done, and they usually find a creative way to succeed. What if this person turns to religion as a socially accepted, even “noble,” avenue for this willpower? Jesus loves him, but until he truly bows his knees to Jesus *from the heart*, he will never be a Christian. Yet such a man in an unconverted state could find acceptance in a group of believers that finds its identity in its works. He might even rise to leadership—at great cost to the flock.

Or consider another person, one who *loves* Jesus and lives for Him, whose daily life is full of spiritual fruit. Yet this person, though genuinely devoted to Christ, cannot in honesty embrace certain of the doctrines of a particular group. He is putting his full weight down on the one God, serving the one Lord, and longing to function in the one Body; he has received the one Baptism and drunk deeply of the one Spirit. Yet this believer could well be excluded from a local assembly based on his inability to endorse wholeheartedly a “disputable matter” (Rom. 14). Could there be anything more divisive than a group of people uniting around some common belief or practice, choosing a distinguishing name for themselves, and behaving as if (despite protests to the contrary) they are the only true church?

The results of choosing an arbitrary identity for the local church, based on our human intellects or emotions or will, is that the church becomes *mixed* and *fragmented*. Our boundaries will include leaven in the batch, and the whole loaf will be affected. And our lines of fellowship will separate people who desperately need each other!

In All Things Preeminent

But this most serious consequence of such an approach is this: *Christ is robbed of His rightful place as the Fullness of the church.*

Please listen to our brother Paul—

To the Ephesians, he said: “*And God made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*” (1:9-10) And again, “*God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be the head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.*” (1:22-23) Still again, “*It was Jesus who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the*

fullness of Christ....Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (4:11-16)

To the Colossians, Paul wrote: *“He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” (1:18-20)*

And to the Philippians? *“Therefore God exalted Christ Jesus to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (2:9-11)*

Finally, to the Corinthian church (although we could continue quoting other passages for several more pages!), Paul exclaimed: *“I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him.” (2 Cor 11:2)*

The Father has a definite goal in mind for any local assembly of believers, wouldn't you say? He longs to make Jesus preeminent among them. He aches to fill them with Jesus. He desires to purify them from everything that would displease Jesus, their husband. He wants Jesus glorified.

Why? *Because He loves Him so much.* And dare we let any other pursuit, no matter how religious, rival that love in our hearts?

Defining the Group By Its Center

If we choose to, we can treat those passages about Jesus as mere positional truths. You know, “Jesus is preeminent in the ‘invisible’ church regardless of whether He seems to be reigning supremely in what’s visible around me. That’s all that matters, anyway.”

Certainly it is true that none of our folly will ultimately dethrone Jesus or deprive Him of His rights as Lord of the Kingdom. Yet once we see the real Jesus in all His Glory, “high and lifted up with His train filling the temple,” how could we be satisfied with restricting Him to theoretical Headship over the church?

Here is one practical way to give Jesus His due: Let’s begin defining the local church, not by some arbitrary boundaries of our making, but by its *center*—Jesus.

Remember, that is how Jesus Himself defined the kind of church that would break down hell’s gates, binding and loosing on earth heaven’s authority. “On this rock,” He said—the rock reflected in Peter’s revelation of His identity—“I will build My church.”

We can start by insisting that Jesus take the center position of our own personal lives. We can declare war on everything inside our hearts that opposes Him. We can *love* Him. We can in trust yield to Him everything—father and mother and brothers and friends and fields—for His sake and the gospel’s. We can seek a continuously increasing revelation of Jesus *to* us and *in* us, all the time resting on His grace and provision rather than frantically attempting to achieve a righteousness of our own.

We can also hold up the same standard for those around us. We can turn up the spotlight as brightly as we can on the One who should be the center and focal point of any gathering of Christians—Jesus, their Lord. We can insist on wholehearted yieldedness to Him—not a flawless life, though we would wish it so, but a heart that is unwilling to lower the standard to accommodate our failures.

And do you know what? Interesting things will begin to happen! Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself.” There is a powerfully compelling attraction to the crucified Messiah, the enthroned sacrificial lamb, for all who have a heart to be saved. When Christ becomes the light, men and women will be attracted like moths to a flame—if they have a revelation of Him, or are desperate to come to know Him.

There will also be a division of sorts, for there was never a more “divisive” man than Jesus! *“Do not suppose*

I have come to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'" (Mt 11:34-36). While some will be drawn to Jesus as if by magnetic attraction, others will be repulsed just as powerfully, and so there will be a separation. The group will find its identity in the pursuit of Jesus and its distinctiveness in His character. Our own life together will begin having such an effect as Jesus truly becomes our focal point: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other the fragrance of life." (2 Cor 2:14-16)

A Plea

In these pages, we've tried to emphasize the centrality of Jesus and the absolute necessity of our seeking to know and exalt Him, both individually and corporately. If any of these words have struck a chord and seem to reflect your Shepherd's voice, will you honor Him and *do something about it?*

Jesus said: "Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." (Mt 7:24-27)

"But what about you?" Jesus asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by My Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Mt 16:15-18)

—drz